

WGU Launches Online College to Tackle Licensed Teacher Crisis

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WASHINGTON — Hoping to attract thousands of current teachers and classroom aides who won't qualify for their jobs when a new federal law takes effect in 2005, Utah's Gov. Mike Leavitt and Education Secretary Rod Paige opened the doors Monday to an online teachers college.

The new arm of the Western Governor's University (WGU), the Internet-based higher education program pioneered by Leavitt and other Western governors, will grant teaching certificates that allow licensing in multiple states. Offered online will be associate of arts degrees for teachers' aides, bachelor's degrees in K-8 teaching and graduate degrees in reading, math, science, technology and English as a second language.

UTAH COLLEGES

Like tuition, student fees are going up

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By doing all but a six-month "teaching demonstration" section via online chat rooms, e-mail, virtual classrooms and video links, the new program aims to allow working adults without time to attend college a chance to become licensed teachers or teachers' aides under the new No Child Left Behind Act. The federal law requires all teachers to have certification and college degrees in the subjects they teach. All aides, or "paraprofessionals," are required to have at least an associate of arts degree by fall 2005.

Although Leavitt was unsure how many

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people now working in Utah's public schools would not measure up to the new federal standards, he said the law has put many state school officials in a panic, especially over fear of losing the legion of "paraprofessionals," the substitute teachers, aides and support staff who will now need the equivalent of a two-year college degree to remain on staff.

"I can assure you there are literally 50 governors worried today how we are going to meet this standard," Leavitt said in a news conference in Paige's office suite. Paraprofessionals "have to find a way to upgrade their skills and they've been in the classroom for sometimes five or eight or 10 years and have very good skills, but leaving their families, leaving their jobs and going off to get credentialed is a difficult problem. This provides a means to link the competencies they are developing."

States are starting to realize the impact of the new federal law, with Arizona legislators last week predicting 3,000 teachers in that state's classrooms won't meet the new standards and predicting school administrators will either be forced to close schools or ignore the law. Schools that don't comply with the law could lose federal grants.

WGU (Web site <http://www.wgu.edu>), which has administrative offices in Salt Lake City, grants degrees on "competency based" measures, where individuals' work experience and professional knowledge supercede time logged in a classroom for academic credit. Although controversial, the streamlined system of turning second-career professionals into certified, licensed teachers over the Internet is viewed as a

possible solution to the national shortage of teachers.

"It's especially important now when we are asking schools to provide a highly qualified teacher to us in every classroom; this is a giant step in the right direction," said Paige, whose agency awarded WGU a \$10 million federal grant in September 2001 to develop teacher education programs. "By the end of 2006, all teachers or academic

substitutes must be highly qualified. In order to reach this goal, we're all going to need to do something different."

Leavitt said the online education and certification — WGU issues a "portable teaching certificate" that is recognized by most states — is meant to "supplement not supplant" the standard pedagogical colleges of education at brick-and-mortar universities.

Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah,

helped steer about \$6.5 million in federal appropriations to WGU since 1999. He supports the online concept because it recognizes "the stupidity" of a qualification system that discourages and many times prohibits highly qualified professionals from entering the teaching profession.

"We are going to see one more bureaucratic barrier to excellence in our schools go down," said Bennett.

Third District Rep. Chris Cannon, R-Utah, heralded the program as the beginning of a global transformation in education.

"What is happening here is easily translatable for people in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and other places, giving them an opportunity to get an education based on competency as opposed to rear-ends in the seats," said Cannon.

WGU President Robert

Mendall said he anticipates "several thousand" students enroll in the teacher's college in the first year, boosted by existing programs with Hollywood and Los Angeles area schools provide teacher training.

"We know the single most important determinant of quality K-12 education is the quality of teachers," he said. "That's the business we are engaged in, to enhance the quality of America's teaching force."